Existential constructions
and two types of comparative concepts:
Construction-functions and construction-strategies

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1. The role of typological comparative concepts
in grammar writing

Each language should be described in its own terms –

> "[Franz] Boas made explicit many of the tenets that have become axiomatic in the best descriptive work: the importance of **describing each language and each culture on their own terms** rather than importing inappropriate European models, the need to discover **the inner design of each language** inductively through the study of texts, and the scientific responsibility to produce as undistorted a record as possible by setting grammar alongside a comprehensive dictionary and text collection" (Evans 2010: 36)

– but grammar writers find typology highly useful: Why is this?

> "Recently, it has become fashionable to **emphasize the difference between language description and typological comparison**, with authors such as Lazard (2002) and Haspelmath (2010) actually conceiving of language description as an enterprise completely separate from typological … inquiry. For practitioners of language description, I would think, **this view is ill-conceived** and does not reflect current practice, which values the **typologically informed model of a descriptive grammar** most highly." (Himmelmann 2016: 475)

The reasons why typology is useful:
  – a widely known set of **general grammatical terms** helps authors
     to make their descriptions **transparent**

           e.g. Eskimo "relative case" > "ergative case"

  – knowledge of grammars of other languages can **inspire** authors to investigate
     topics that they might not otherwise think of

Describers need typology for transparency and inspiration (Haspelmath 2020)

Is there a contradiction between Boas/Evans/Lazard and Himmelmann?

No: – Himmelmann emphasizes the usefulness of typology
         for transparency and inspiration

       – Boas/Evans/Lazard emphasize the uniqueness of each language system,
          i.e. the independence of language-particular categories from typology

2. Existential constructions

Let us consider a specific construction type to illustrate some issues that arise with typological comparative concepts: **existential constructions**

Which of the following is an existential construction?

(1) English
   a. **There is** A BIRD *on the roof.*
   b. *A BIRD* **is** *on the roof.*

(2) Finnish
   Kato-lla   **on**   *lintu.*
   roof-ADESS   is   bird
   'There is a bird on the roof.'   (cf. *Lintu on katolla* 'The bird is on the roof.')

(3) Logudorese Sardinian (Bentley et al. 2015: 7)
   In   custu   istradone nch'   **at**   *una   crezǎ.*
   in   this   road   there   have.3SG a   church
   'In this road there is a church.' (Lit. 'It there has a church in this road.')

(4) Tagalog
   May   *mga   tao   sa   labas.*
   EXV   PL   person LOC   outside
   'There are people outside.' (Sabbagh 2009: 678)

(5) Wambaya (Mirndi, Australia)
   Garnguji   *julaji-rdarra*   *gayangga   darranggu-ni.*
   many.NOM   bird-GROUP.NOM   high   tree-LOC
   'There are lots of bird up in the trees.' (Nordlinger 1998: 177)

(6) German
   a. **temporary location of existent**
      *Auf   dem   Tisch   **stehen** Blumen.*
      on   the   table   stand   flowers
      'There are flowers on the table.' (Cf. *?*Auf dem Tisch gibt es Blumen.*)

   b. **permanent presence of existent**
      *In   Thailand   **gibt**   es   Tiger.*
      in   Thailand   gives   it   tigers
      'There are tigers in Thailand.' (Cf. *?*In Thailand sind Tiger.*)

This depends on the **definition**, of course, but which definition of "existential construction" is the best one?

> [Note that for the transparency function of typological concepts, the terminology should be uniform; cf. Haspelmath 2021]

Everyone agrees that (1a) is an existential construction, because the term *existential clause* was coined in an English-speaking context (Jespersen 1924: 155; Lyons 1967; Clark 1978), and (1a) is always given as the first example.

(1) a. **There is** A BIRD *on the roof.*

Now from this stereotypical example, the term *existential clause* can be extended in two directions:

    – to all constructions expressing the same function   e.g. *A BIRD is on the roof.*
    – to all constructions using similar formal elements   e.g. French *Il **y** a Jean!*
                                                'Jean is there!'

3. Form-based and function-based extensions

For many traditional grammatical terms, we observe both form-based extensions and function-based extensions.

reflexive construction   (cf. Haspelmath 2022c)

stereotype: *They **saw themselves** in the mirror.*
form-based: *They behaved **themselves**.*
function-based: *They dressed.*   (Reuland 2011: "reflexive predicate")

future tense construction

stereotype: French   *Ils chant-**er**-ont.*   'They will sing.'
form-based: French   *Ils l'au-**r**-ont dit.*   'They have probably said it.'
function-based: French   *Ils vont chanter.*   'They are going to sing.'

causative construction

stereotype: Arabic   *ʕallama*   'cause to know, teach'
form-based: Arabic   *jammaʕa*   'accumulate' (from *jamaʕa* 'gather')
function-based: English   *break (tr.)*   'cause to break (intr.)'

nominalization construction

stereotype: *the construct-**ion** of the city*
form-based: *the construct-**ions** in French*
function-based: *the attack on the city*

adjectival construction

stereotype: English   *the **new** house*
form-based: English   *the **royal** family*
function-based: Mandarin   *fángzi hěn **dà** '*the house is big'
                                      (formally: a stative verb)

In all these cases, we can say that there are "form-based constructions" and "function-based constructions" – and apparent disagreement in typology often revolve about form-based extension vs. function-based extension of traditional terminology.

4. Construction-functions vs. construction-strategies

Grammatical terms can often be used both for **construction-functions**
and for **construction-strategies** (Croft 2016; 2022)

Both types of construction concepts are **comparative concepts**, i.e. concepts that are defined in the same way for all languages, and are thus different from descriptive categories.

– a **construction-function** is a type of construction defined by its function
– a **construction-strategy** is a type of construction defined by its formal properties

(Croft's terminology is a bit odd:

construction-functions	= Croft: "constructions"
construction-strategies	= Croft: "strategies")

For a construction-function, a typology may ask about **types of strategies:**

e.g.   types of **polar questions** (Dryer 2005a)
        types of **predpossessive clauses** (Stassen 2005)
        types of **ordinal numerals** (Stolz & Veselinova 2005)
        types of **relative clauses** (Dryer 2005b)
        types of **plural number** constructions (Dryer 2005c)

For a construction-strategy, a typology may ask about additional meanings (**coexpression patterns**):

e.g.   add. meanings of **reciprocal markers** (e.g. reflexive; Maslova & Nedjalkov 2005)
        add. meanings of **comitative flags** (e.g. instrumental; Stolz et al. 2005)
        add. meanings of **relativizers** (e.g. genitive flag; Gil 2005)
        add. meanings of **nominal conjunctors** (e.g. verbal conj.; Haspelmath 2005)

As a first approximation, a descriptive grammar can be thought of as **a set of construction-strategies** that are associated with a pre-established construction-functions

    (this is particularly clear in the grammars based on the Comrie & Smith (1977)
    questionnaire, which consists of questions about construction-functions).

But: each **language-particular construction(-strategy)** needs to be defined in its own terms in addition to being related to comparative strategy types.

5. Existential constructions

The term **existential clause construction** has been used in two senses:
  – for construction-functions (e.g. Clark 1978)
  – for construction-strategies (e.g. McNally 2016; Creissels 2019)

In the first sense (which I prefer; see Haspelmath 2022a), an existential clause construction is

> "a clause construction in which an indefinite and discourse-new nominal phrase (the EXISTENT) is said to be in some location"

In this sense, all of the clauses in (1)-(6) §1 are existential clauses.

In the construction-strategy sense, *existential clause* has been defined as

> "a sentence type that is **"noncanonical" in structure**, whether due to some aspect of their syntax or the presence of a distinguished lexical item (e.g. Spanish *hay*), and that are invariably accompanied by what appears to be a special semantics or discourse function related to introducing the presence or existence of some individual(s)" (McNally 2016: 212)

In this latter definition, the following would probably not be regarded as "existential clauses", because they are not "non-canonical" except for word order.

(1) English
  b. *A BIRD **is** on the roof.*

(2) Finnish
  *Kato-lla   **on**   lintu.*
  roof-ADESS   is   bird
  'There is a bird on the roof.'   (cf. *Lintu on katolla* 'The bird is on the roof.')

(5) Wambaya (Mirndi, Australia)
  Garnguji   julaji-rdarra   gayangga   darranggu-ni.
  many.NOM   bird-GROUP.NOM   high   tree-LOC
  'There are lots of bird up in the trees.' (Nordlinger 1998: 177)

But defining existential constructions as "somehow non-canonical" is not very helpful, because there is a wide range of possible non-canonical behaviours which do not make the domain coherent.

> "... it is difficult to pin down exactly what these constructions have in common across languages... Because what is canonical differs from language to language, we find corresponding variation in existential sentences crosslinguistically." (McNally 2016: 212)

There is one unfortunate consequence of definining **existential construction** as "a clause construction in which an indefinite and discourse-new nominal phrase is said to be in some location":

Clauses expressing "pure existence" do not fall under the definition. I propose to call them **hyparctic clauses** (Greek *hyparxis* 'existence'):

(7)   Latin
      *Cogito,   ergo   **sum**.*
      I.think   therefore I.exist
      'I think, therefore I am.' (René Descartes, 1637)

(8)   Hamar (South Omotic)
      *Bajó **dáa**.*
      fate   EXV
      'Fate exists.' (Petrollino 2019: 8)

(9)   Classical Arabic
      لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا ٱللَّٰهُ
      Laa ʔilaah-a ʔillaa   'llaahu.
      not god-ACC unless Allah
      'There is no deity but God.' (Quran 37:35)

Creissels (2019) notes that it is odd if such clauses are not called "existential", and I agree, but grammatical terminology is often odd. (For example, *accusative case* has nothing to do with "accusing".)

6. Strategies for existential constructions

If *existential construction* is defined as a construction-function, we can start typologizing the various construction-strategies used for this function:

(10) ***existive-copula strategy***: Tagalog
      ***May** mga tao   sa   labas.*
      EXV   PL   person LOC   outside
      'There are people outside.' (Sabbagh 2009: 678)

(11) ***transpossessive-existential strategy***: Seychelles Creole
      *Leri **annan**   koudvan zot   pa   reste lo   sa zil.*
      when 3SG have   hurricane they not stay on   the island
      'When there is a hurricane they don't stay on the island.' (Michaelis & Rosalie 2013)

(12) ***prolocative strategy***: Italian
      ***Ci**   **sono** molte   montagne in Svizzera.*
      PROLOC are   many   mountains in Switzerland
      'There are many mountains in Switzerland.'

(13) ***existent-postposing strategy***: Finnish
      *Kato-lla   **on** lintu.*
      roof-ADESS   is   bird
      'There is a bird on the roof.' (cf. *Lintu on katolla* 'The bird is on the roof.')

7. A brief discussion of Creissels (2019) [the paper that inspired this talk]

Creissels (2019) makes two key terminological choices:
– he opts for a strategy-based defnition (like McNally 2016)
– he replaces McNally's (2016) term by ***inverse-locational***

Moreover, he defines inverse-locational not by referring to "indefinite and discourse new nominals", but by invoking a special "perspectivizing" function (Partee & Borschev 2007). This seems to be tailored to accommodate Russian and French examples such as the following:

(14) Russian
Ivana   ne   bylo.
Ivan.GEN   not   was
'Ivan was not there.'

(15) French
Il n' y   avait   pas Jeanne au   cours.
it not there had   not Jeanne at   course
'Jeanne was not there at the lecture.'

Creissels (2019) is quite right that "thematic location" and "rhematic location" (Koch 2012) is not the right distinction:

(16) "**rhematic location**": *There is A CAT on the mat.*
(17) "**thematic location**": *The cat is ON THE MAT.*
                                    (because we can say: (17b) *THE CAT is on the mat)*

If we specify "indefinite and discourse new", then (17b) is correctly classified as not existential.

Creissels (2019) also wants to restrict inverse-locational to "temporary location", so that only (6a) would count. But again, this is arbitrary, and permanent-presence existentials have traditionally also been included (so they are included in my definition).

(6) German
  a. **temporary location of existent**
     Auf   dem Tisch   stehen Blumen.
     on   the table   stand flowers
     'There are flowers on the table.' (Cf. *?*Auf dem Tisch gibt es Blumen.*)

  b. **permanent presence of existent**
     In   Thailand   gibt   es   Tiger.
     in   Thailand   gives   it   tigers
     'There are tigers in Thailand.' (Cf. *?*In Thailand sind Tiger.*)

8. Conclusion

Terminology matters if typology is to help language describers use transparent terminology. **Terminology should be uniform.**

Uniform terminology cannot be the result of research. Moro's (2006: 210) overview article starts out as follows:

> "Establishing the defining structure of an existential sentence, thus, has become a major goal of syntactic theory." (Moro 2006: 210)

This makes sense if "existential construction" is in some way an innate building block of UG (universal grammar), but if it is a general typological term, finding its definition cannot be a research goal.

I do not know how terminology becomes uniform – sometimes this works by government decisions (e.g. the SI units such as the meter and the kilogram).

I probably don't want governments to interfere in grammatical terminology, but I think that a first step toward less confusion is to be aware of the distinction between **construction-functions** and **construction-strategies**.

Croft (2016; 2022) has helped my understanding a lot, and I wanted to share this insight with the conference participants.

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